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Collecting Burns: A Conversation

G. Ross Roy

University of South Carolina - Columbia

Patrick Scott

University of South Carolina - Columbia, scottp@mailbox.sc.edu

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**COLLECTING ROBERT BURNS:
A CONVERSATION WITH G. ROSS ROY¹**

(2009)

PS: Maybe we should start by asking you how you first encountered Burns or got interested in collecting Burns.

GRR: In 1932, when I was eight years old, my grandfather, W. Ormiston Roy, who used to go to Scotland from Canada every summer, took me with him, just the two of us, and we toured Scotland. He had a driver. Later, after the war, I was at university, and he lived walking distance from the university and my parents didn't, so I moved in with him. He was a widower by then, and his great enthusiasm was Burns, and we talked Burns a great deal of the time. When he died, in 1958, he left me his Burns collection, which is what really got me into the collecting bit of Burns.

PS: When you got the core collection, though, your grandfather didn't have a Kilmarnock, which is the cornerstone of any great Burns collection. Tell us about your Kilmarnock.

GRR: Well, I was already a collector when I inherited my grandfather's collection. In particular, I'd collected Canadian poetry. When I inherited his Burns, I realized I couldn't house both of the collections, because the Canadian poetry collection was about the fourth or fifth largest in

¹ This is an edited transcript of Ross Roy's conversation in 2008 with Patrick Scott, then Director of Rare Books & Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries. The conversation was recorded in December 2008 ready for the University of Glasgow's Robert Burns 250th Anniversary conference in January 2009, and it was shown again during the South Carolina conference in April that year. The illustrations all come from items in the G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries.

Canada, so I sold it, and that gave me enough money to be able to buy a Kilmarnock. At one time, my grandfather had one—he'd bought one in 1939, and World War II broke out and he had to get out of Britain, over to Holland, to be able to get home. And he left the Kilmarnock in Scotland, and after the war it had disappeared. So he'd had one, but he didn't have one, so to speak. With the money that I got from the sale of the Canadian collection, I was able to buy this.

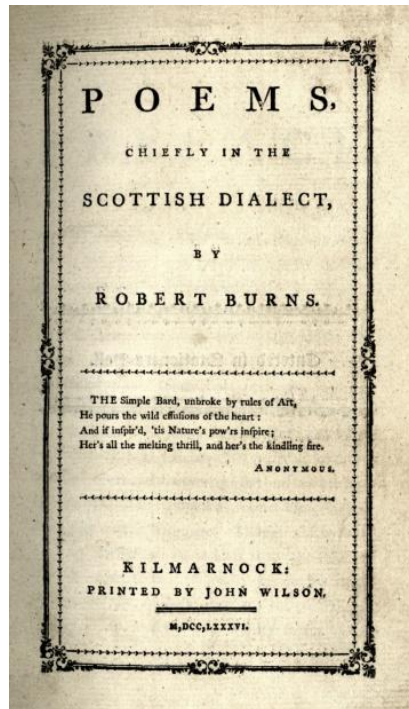
Kilmarnocks were easier to find back then. There were 612 printed, and about seventy of them still exist now. When I wanted to buy one, I just wrote to two or three dealers and almost by return mail I had two copies offered to me.

PS: Wouldn't happen now....

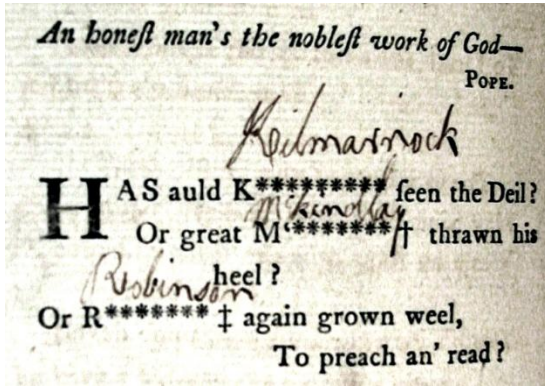
GRR: That's right. There are probably not more than five or six or seven in private hands any longer. The rest are in institutional libraries, of course. The Kilmarnock is one of Grolier's hundred Great Books of the World. My copy is in a splendid Riviere binding, of red morocco, heavily gilt, perhaps a little too gaudy for a simple book of poems. I always say it should be on an edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam*, rather than the Kilmarnock.

PS: By contrast, Burns's second book, the Edinburgh edition, was relatively easy to get when you started. It's an expensive book now, but by the time your collection came to the library, you actually had eight copies, including one in boards in perfect original condition, and including both variants of the printing. Why did you recently buy another? This is the ninth copy in the collection....

GRR: Well, there's nothing like being greedy. This extra copy belonged to a friend of Burns—Robert Ainslie, who subscribed for two copies. This was Ainslie's copy annotated for him in Burns's own hand. In the



eighteenth century if you used a person's name in a poem or letter and didn't want to reveal completely who the person was, you put the first and the last letters of the name and an asterisk for each letter in between.



In this copy, in about thirty places, Burns has actually filled in the names of people in ink. The names would have been known to an inner circle, so this is a very important book. In particular, it's the first identification, in "Death and

Doctor Hornbook," of who Doctor Hornbook was. He was a Tarbolton schoolmaster. I'm not going to say that there aren't other copies that Burns filled in, but there certainly aren't very many of them.

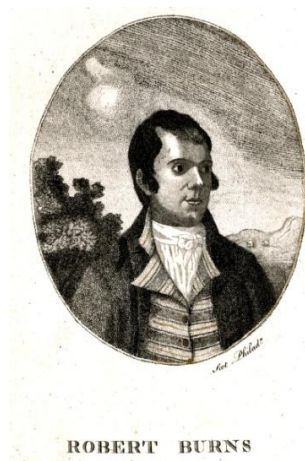
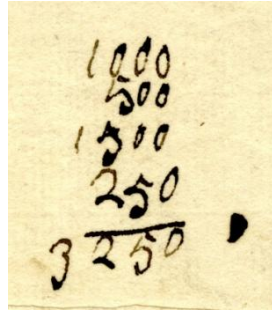
PS: If the Edinburgh edition is more available as a book, do we know how many copies were printed?

GRR: Well, the collection has a letter that was sent to Burns from Henry Mackenzie, author of a well-respected novel, *The Man of Feeling*. Mackenzie also wrote an early flattering review of Burns's Kilmarnock edition, and Burns and Mackenzie knew each other. The letter has got some scribbling on it in Burns's handwriting, some numbers, and I can think of no other possibility but that they refer to the number of copies printed of the Edinburgh edition.

Now, the initial run was to be 1500 copies, but before a book was published, subscription lists used to be circulated around, and you signed up, and that was a binding contract for you to pay such and such an amount for the book when it came out. Before the Edinburgh edition was completely done, but when most of it was, the subscription list came in, and it was discovered that the 1500 copies that they'd run were not going to be enough. So they re-set the first bit of the book with several differences. It was all hand-set, of course, in those days. The most notable difference was in the poem "To a Haggis," where the first group of copies says the haggis-fed Scot wants "nae skinking ware," or no greasy, watery

foreign food, and instead, in the reprint, they put in the, less Scottish word “stinking.”²

Burns said in a letter that there’d been three thousand copies printed, but that was, I think, just a rough number, because there’d been fifteen hundred the first time and so they sort of doubled it. The numbers on the Mackenzie letter add up to thirty-two-fifty. I suggest they are: one thousand the additional names for the subscribers; five hundred the copies that Creech, the printer, subscribed to; fifteen-hundred the original “skinking” copies; and two hundred and fifty probably those copies sent to London. Now there was a London edition also in 1787, but it didn’t come out until July, whereas the Edinburgh edition came out in April. In the meantime, Creech has to have sent some copies down to London, because copies were being advertised for sale a good while before the London edition came out. So I think that Burns’s numbers are important. Of course, people didn’t have spare paper in those



days. It was an expensive commodity, so Burns would just use something to scribble on.

PS: Your collection goes on from those very early editions to chart the spread of Burns’s reputation all round the world, and it includes the first American edition, from Philadelphia, and the first New York edition, which is the first American edition with the portrait.

GRR: Yes, the Philadelphia is the first. It came a year after the Edinburgh edition, in 1788, and was soon reprinted. There were probably six—maybe even seven—eighteenth-century American editions of Burns.

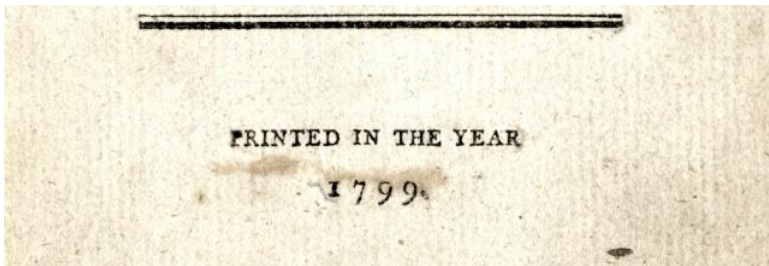
PS: The New York is the first American edition to have a portrait, and it faces the other way from the portrait in the Edinburgh....

² [Cf. *SND*. This sentence is modified from the original interview. P.G.S.]

GRR: Yes, because it had to be re-engraved. If you copied an engraving, then when you printed it, it looks the other way. Now in the Edinburgh edition, Burns is looking left, away from the title page. Burns said to somebody in a letter, "I'm having my portrait done where, like other idiots, I shall be facing my title page." But in fact he didn't face his title page in Edinburgh, only in New York.

PS: Although both the Kilmarnock and the Edinburgh editions are rare, they are not the rarest books in the collection. That's the 1799 *The Merry Muses*, of which there are only two copies known. Can you tell us something about it and how you got it?

GRR: In 1964, there was, finally, the permission, legally, in the U.S., to publish what was called erotic, or "disgusting," material, depending on which chair you're sitting in. This allowed regular publication of *The Merry Muses* in this country, and also in Britain. One of the editors, Sydney Goodsir Smith, who was a good friend of mine, a poet, a very able poet, and music critic, was in a pub one evening, and he was passing around the new edition. In it, there's an illustration of the then only known copy, with a torn title page lacking the date. Some working-class chap was there and said "Oh, I've got one of those," and people laughed, you know, "ha, ha, ha." So he said, "Well, okay, wait a minute and I'll go and get it." He went out and came back in a few minutes and there it was, a perfect copy. That's the copy in the Roy Collection. I happened to be very lucky that I landed in Britain and was told about this. So, indirectly, through a dealer, I bought it.



At an earlier time, somebody had bound into it pornographic Rowlandson engravings. I was terrified that, when I was going back into the U.S., if the customs officer saw these illustrations, the books would be confiscated. I think I drew the customs officer's attention to the fact that I had more whiskey than I was allowed, so he got more interested in

the whiskey than in the book. The University published a facsimile of this book on its two hundredth anniversary in 1999, and I wrote a little pamphlet to go with it. So the rarest book in the collection is available to other people in a good facsimile.

PS: But there are only two copies of the 1799 original?

GRR: There are only two.

PS: And only one with its title page?

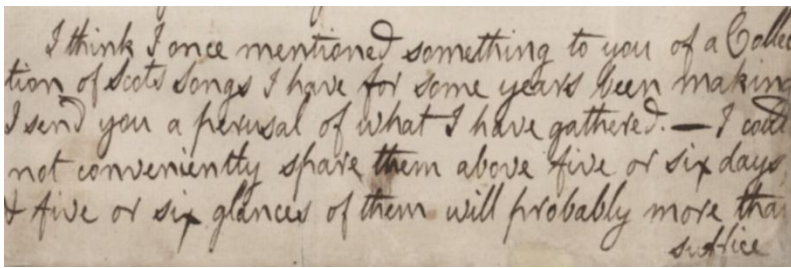
GRR: Only one with a complete title page.

PS: I've been told—by you—that there's only one letter of Burns that ever refers to the *Merry Muses* collection, and that letter is also in your collection.

GRR: That's right.

PS: You've edited Burns's letters. Why does the original letter—this particular original letter—matter so much?³

GRR: Well, because it's the first proof that we have that Burns actually collected bawdy verse. He sends his manuscript collection to a friend to be looked at, and he says "It's the only collection around, and it's taken me a long time to put it together."



This letter was written in 1792, and Burns died in 1796, and three years later *The Merry Muses* was published. There are those who claim that the book was published in Dumfries, because Burns lived in Dumfries, but I find that very highly unlikely. It was most likely published in Edinburgh, and it must have been a very small print-run for there to be only two copies left. So this is an important letter, and it's quite remarkable that we've got the edition and we've got the letter. They were bought separately.

PS: James Currie published this letter, didn't he?

³ For fuller illustration of this letter, see p. 105 above.

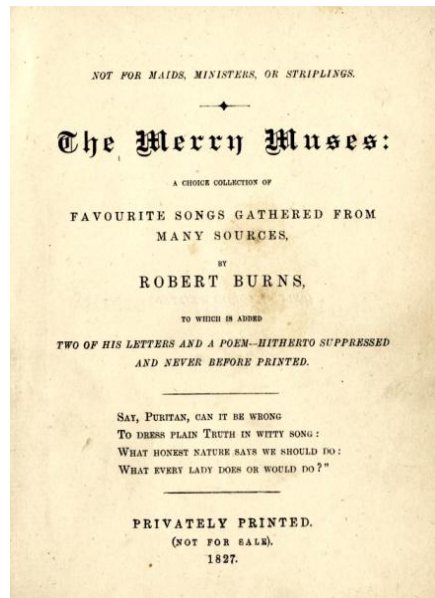
GRR: Yes, Currie was chosen to edit Burns after Burns's death, and his edition of the *Works* came out in four volumes in 1800. Currie was a Scot, but he was a medical doctor living and practicing in England. I think Currie must have known that *The Merry Muses* had already been published, because he takes the 1792 letter, and includes it in the *Works*, but he puts in one extra sentence which Burns never wrote "A very few of them are my own," referring to the bawdy poems. Well, this isn't true, of course, and Currie has to stand accused of doctoring up Burns's letter.

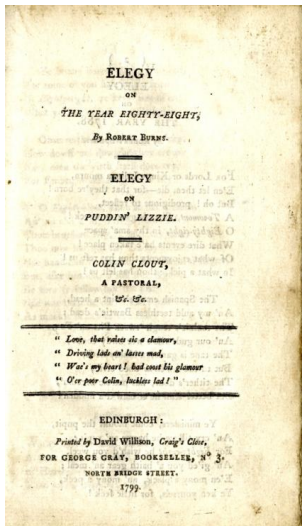
PS: Generally Currie wasn't a bad editor for his time, was he?

GRR: For his day, I would say he was a "B." A "B+," at best.

PS: One of the other remarkable things about your collection is the extent to which you've been able to track later underground re-printings of *The Merry Muses*. Tell us about this one which, according to its title page, was published in 1827.

GRR: Well, in Britain, for more than a century after Burns, it was a serious crime to publish pornography, but it was only a sort of misdemeanor to sell it. So, probably in 1872, a London publisher, John C. Hotten, set up this reprint of *The Merry Muses*, putting this false date on it, so that, if the police descended upon him, he would be able to say, "I'm only selling an old secondhand book." The tactic caught on and, by 1910, there had been twelve variant printings of this, all dated 1827, but not all done by Hotten. In our collection, we have eleven of that twelve, which is more than any other library in the world has. People think the "1827" editions are reprints of the 1799 edition, but they are not. There's additional material put in there. Some of it is so demonstrably not Burns that just by looking at it a sophomore would know Burns wasn't capable of writing poetry that bad.





PS: We have time to look at a couple more early Burns items. This is a beautiful binding, but it's also a very rare item inside.

GRR: It's rare indeed; it's the only known copy. When I picked it up, it was disbound. I knew a wonderful Scottish binder, Moncur, who worked in Falkirk, and I took it to him. He'd done other bindings for me, and I said "I want this bound nicely," and he said, "I've got a piece of morocco that I've been keeping for the right thing. It's the finest piece I've ever handled." I said, "Do what you like with it," so he put this Scottish wheel binding on it, which is really a beautiful piece of binding.

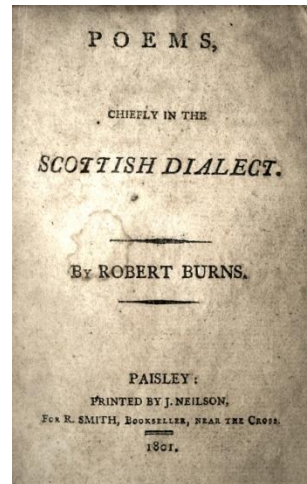
PS: The two chapbooks inside are called

the Gray tracts, is that right?

GRR: Yes, they both include Burns poems, and one of them has probably the first printing of a poem by Burns. The first of the Gray tracts is known in one or two other copies, and for the second, I don't believe there's another copy around.⁴

PS: This second book, from Paisley in 1801-1802, is much more ordinary looking. It doesn't have a beautiful binding at all, just plain paper wrappers. But it also is very rare.

GRR: Yes, I think my friend Moncur wouldn't have chosen this for a binding. You can probably see, this book was published in several separate parts, and that was not known until I got this copy. Now according to COPAC and OCLC

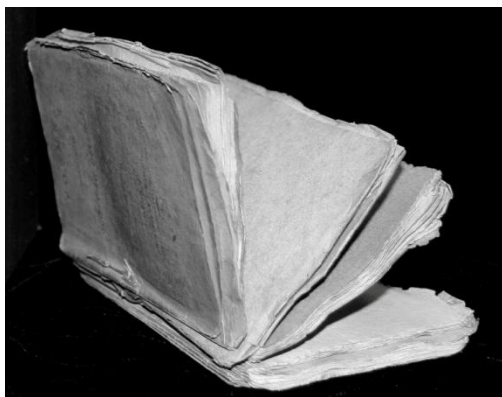


⁴ [Egerer had never seen a copy of either Gray tract, and they were not in the 1959 Mitchell Catalogue; COPAC and WorldCat now show copies of both at the National Library of Scotland, and single copies of each elsewhere. Eds.]

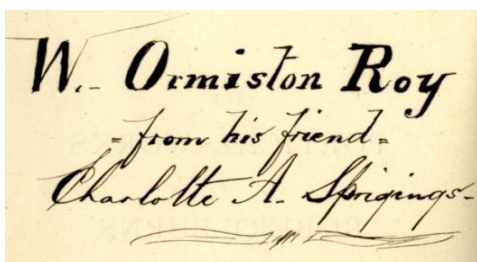
there are only three known copies that survive, and the one in the Mitchell Library, which has the greatest printed Burns collection in the world, is wanting the title page.

PS: The thing that struck me about it was that although the sections have been loosely stitched together, when you look inside, you can see where the separate sections were when it was being sold bit by bit. When did you get it?

GRR: Well, it was several years ago, before they pulled down the Gorbals. There was an old sort of junky secondhand bookshop there, and I went in there and spent a bit of time. The owner had a bunch of stuff in his office that hadn't been put out on the shelves, so I said, "Do you mind



if I go in there," and he said, "okay." I went in, and I found this Paisley edition, which wasn't priced. I knew it was something I didn't have. I didn't know how rare it was at that time, but I certainly knew I wanted it. So I said, "How much do you want for that?," and here's this guy looking me up and down, thinking "Oh, boy, I'm going to take this American for a ride," and I'm wondering "Will fifty pounds get it for me? Will a hundred pounds get it for me? Will I have to go and tell the bank manager I need an overdraft to buy it?" And he says, "I paid a lot for that," and my heart sank even further, and he said, "I've got to ask you thirty shilling." So I didn't hesitate to pay him.



PS: You have tried to collect every Burns edition, not just the rarities. This next book you maybe wouldn't look at twice on a secondhand shelf, but I think it's the first book from your grandfather's Burns collection.

GRR: Yes, my grandmother gave it to him on Christmas 1890. They were married two or three years later. This is the first Burns book that we can identify as being in the family. It's always said that any Scotsman who left Scotland took two books with him: the Bible and Robert Burns. Which would suggest that my paternal great-grandfather would have brought a Burns out with him when he left Paisley to settle in Montreal. But I haven't been able to identify that copy, and this certainly is the real thing.

PS: So that takes the collection back to 1890. One of the most distinctive things from your grandfather's collection is Burns's wooden porridge bowl, and you were with your grandfather when he bought it?

GRR: Yes, it was during that visit to Britain in 1932 when he bought the bowl and I think also Burns's horn spoon. The bowl was displayed as being Burns's in the great Glasgow Exhibition of 1896, and it is illustrated in the catalogue published in 1898. The bowl I'm happier with than the spoon. It's got "R. B." engraved in there, but I can't imagine eating porridge if you have to put your initials on the spoon. Certainly the bowl is good.

PS: They *were* exhibited in 1896 at the Glasgow Exhibition.



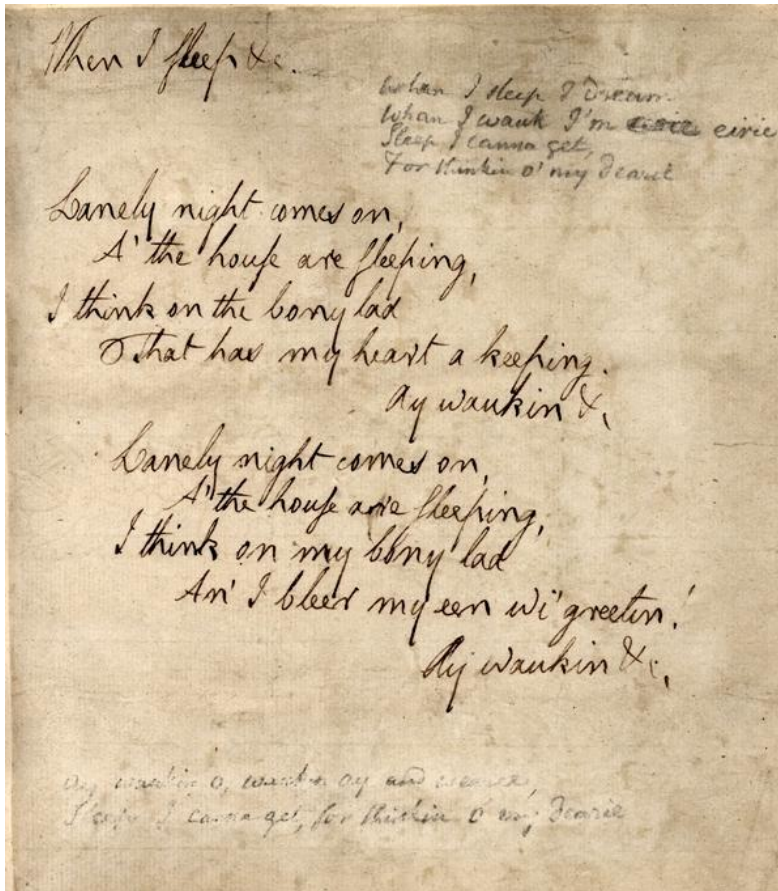
GRR: Yes, but, you know, look at the relics of the true cross...

PS: The things that came most recently to the library collection were your Burns manuscripts. That was the last phase of the transfer and included manuscripts of poems by Burns. Tell us about this one, which is Burns's song, "When I Sleep I Dream" or "Ay Waukin O."

GRR: Yes, this is a Burns song. This manuscript has eight lines, in two stanzas. One stanza is known; the other stanza is an unrecorded variant. Now, Burns, of course, like every poet, like Keats, experimented. You think of Keats scribbling, and scribbling, and scribbling until he got it right. And the thing with both Keats and Burns is that they could fool around with wording, but once they got it right, they knew then that it was right. They never seem to have made a mistake in choosing what was the best version of a poem.

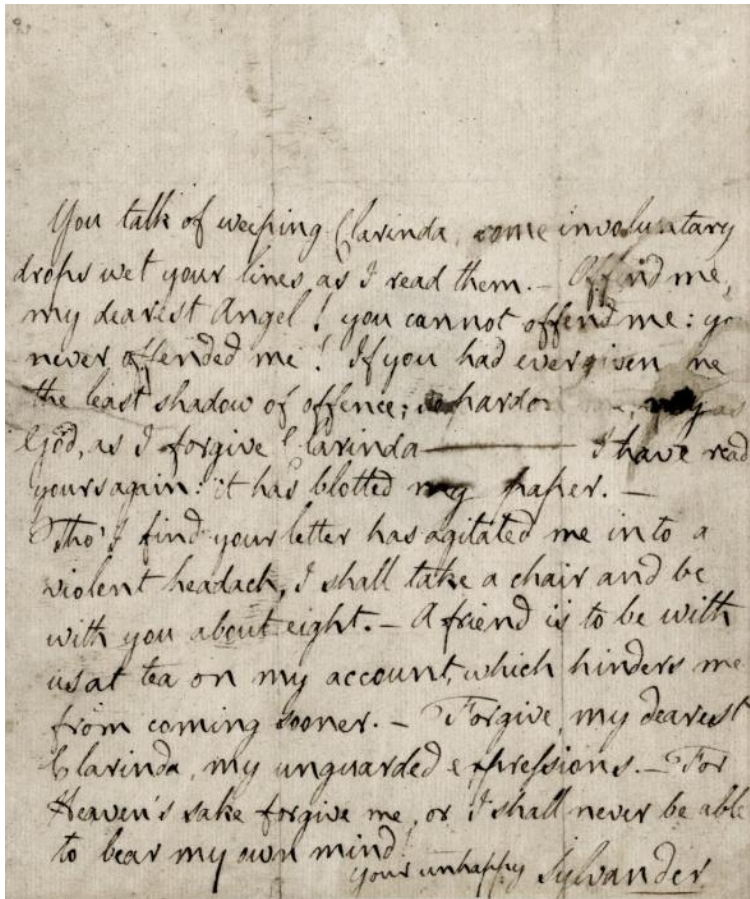
PS: You told Kinsley about your manuscript of this poem, but he didn't, I think, collate all the variants in it fully, did he?

GRR: No.



PS: As well as poetic manuscripts, you've got some very notable letters. We had a few Burns letters in the library before this last transfer, but not that many. This is one of the most impressive of the new transfers, a letter of Burns to Clarinda.

GRR: Yes. "You speak of weeping, Clarinda." I call it, as do others, the "teardrop letter," because there's a nice little smudge. Jim Mackay, who wrote a very, very substantial book on Burns, quotes us—my wife and me—as having a disagreement—that Lucie firmly believes that the smudge is a teardrop and I think it could as easily have been a drop of whiskey.

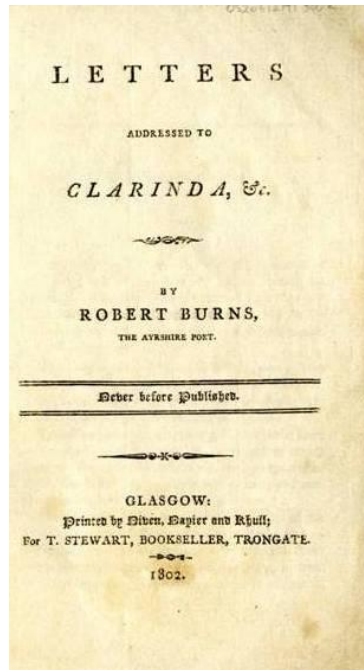


You talk of weeping Clarinda, some involuntary drops wet your lines as I read them. — Offend me, my dearest Angel! you cannot offend me: you never offended me! If you had ever given me the least shadow of offence; ~~and pardon~~ — ~~my dear~~ God, will I forgive Clarinda — I have read yours again: it has blotted my paper. — Tho' I find your letter has agitated me into a violent headache, I shall take a chair and be with you about eight. — A friend is to be with us at tea on my account, which hinders me from coming sooner. — I forgive, my dearest Clarinda, my unguarded expressions. — For Heaven's sake forgive me, or I shall never be able to bear my own mind! —
your unhappy Alexander

PS: The collection also has two letters from Clarinda, one writing back to Burns in 1788 that has never been published with her other letters, and a later one trying to stop the letters being published at all.

GRR: That's right. There was an illegal printing of twenty-five of Burns's letters to Clarinda in 1802 that resulted in a lawsuit. The publisher Stewart was directed by the court in 1804 not to sell any more copies. I'm sure that a good few were sold. Burns was already dead. There are two versions about how the editor Findley got hold of these letters. Clarinda had forbidden him to publish them; he was only supposed to be allowed to take extracts. Later, Allan Cunningham, who published a *Life of Burns*, asked Agnes McLehose—or Clarinda—for permission to publish the letters and was refused. This is a second letter, again refusing. This was not adhered to by her grandson. She died in 1841 and two years later in 1843 her grandson got out an edition. Now the 1802 edition only published Burns's letters to Clarinda, but the 1843 one includes her letters to Burns. More of Burns's letters to Clarinda survived—considerably more—than of her letters to Burns; I think perhaps because Burns was a married man and he may have felt that he had to get them out of the way; whereas she was married but her husband and she were separated and he lived in Jamaica, so there was no danger of him dropping by and seeing the letters.

PS: The two editions of the *Letters to Clarinda* in the Roy Collection are very different books. The 1843 edition is splendidly bound, while the 1802 edition is an insignificant-looking little pamphlet. You already had two copies of the 1802 edition before you got this. Why did you get this third one?



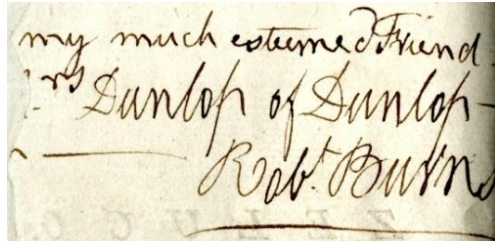
GRR: Because it's in wrappers. Nobody knew that it was issued that way, and any time you can get something in its original issue state, it's a big plus, I would say, for a book collector but also for a scholar, as for instance, with that Paisley thing: the scholar is interested in knowing that it came out in parts.

PS: It tells you something about the kind of people buying the book.

GRR: Of course, it would be assumed that, when a person of means bought a book like this, he would have it re-bound.

PS: As well as books by Burns, and manuscripts, you've also got some books inscribed by Burns. This is one inscribed to Mrs. Dunlop.

GRR: Yes, this is the first volume of John Moore's *Zeluco*, a novel which had some success in its day, although I don't think it's read much anymore. Burns liked it, and in the letter to Mrs. Dunlop that



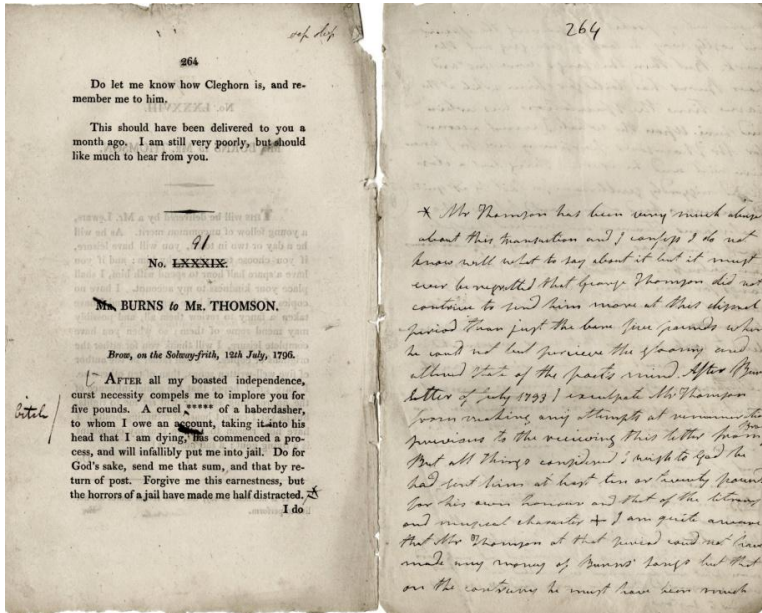
accompanied this book he said, "I hope you don't mind, but I always scribble on my books." At one place he's written "a glorious story" in here. Burns got to know Dr. Moore through Mrs. Dunlop. Moore was a kind of fuddy-duddy. He wrote to Burns, telling him that his poetry was pretty good, but that he would really do better if he picked up some of the "heathen mythology" as he called it, namely use classical forms and write in English rather than Scots. Burns was deferential to Moore, but he ignored his advice. Burns wrote some poems in English, but most them are inferior to those in Scots.

PS: You also collect things that show other people's responses to Burns. This copy of Burns's poems, a reprint of the Currie edition, with a lot of loose pages, belonged to James Hogg. What is the significance of that?

GRR: Well, it's significant for us because the universities of Stirling and South Carolina are jointly involved in the complete works of Hogg under Professor Douglas Mack's editorship. Hogg and William Motherwell published an edition of Burns drawing based on the Currie edition. Hogg took a good deal of information from it. In our copy he has written various things having to do with his reading—his interpretation if you will—of Burns.

PS: Hogg's notes tend to be quite personal, don't they, and William Motherwell came and added the more informational ones later on.

GRR: That's right. Well, Hogg was not a scholar; he was a writer. There were four volumes in the edition Hogg owned, but where are the other three? Who knows?



PS: Studying Burns and working on Burns has taken you to some pretty amazing places, and the collection reflects that. One time, I understand, you went to Moscow for a conference?

GRR: Yes, it was the first Burns conference to be held in Moscow.

PS: This is one of the books that came from that visit?

GRR: Yes. Not the first, but the first major, translator of Burns into Russian was Samuel Marshak. Marshak's now dead and his apartment is a museum in Moscow. I gave a talk at the conference and met Marshak's son, and he said to me, "Come

To Prof. Ross Roy
with compliments
from Samuel Marshak
Moscow Jan 26th, 1975

on over and I'll take you through the apartment." And I told him, "You know, I don't have an early edition of your father's translation." I suppose he was the curator of that museum, but anyway, without hesitating, he just reached in and pulled this volume out and gave it to me.

PS: One of the Burns things that you acquired when you were in Scotland last year was this locket. Can you tell us about it?

GRR: That's a silhouette done by Miers. He did Burns, he did Clarinda, and he did the King. So he was well known in his day. This is Burns's



copy of the silhouette of Clarinda. In a letter he thanks Clarinda for having it done, and there's a lock of hair at the back of it. He says that he will wear it next to his heart, pretty much for the rest of his life. Now, this must have posed a bit of a problem, because he later had a wife, and he had a few girlfriends along the way. And one wonders if this locket perhaps got removed. But it's a beautiful thing. There are two or three other copies, but none with locks of hair in them, which would suggest that this is the one that Burns actually owned.

PS: We've spent a lot of time talking about books, and things, and manuscripts, and I wondered whether you wanted, in closing, to tell us something about what's kept you interested in Burns. It's more than fifty years since you first wrote on Burns, and I wondered what you feel has kept you going and kept your interest.

GRR: I suppose what makes Burns one of the best known poets in the world is his ability to talk to everybody. He writes, sometimes, as a woman, and women have told me that he somehow captured the feelings of a woman—something one doesn't necessarily expect of a poet. And "Auld Lang Syne" is, I maintain, the best known non-religious and non-political song in the world. It's sung in India, in Japan, it's sung all over the place. He's just a very human person. Just hard not to like him

PS: What do you hope for the future of the Roy Collection?

GRR: I've set up a fellowship in my grandfather's name for researchers to use it, and an endowment, so this collection, once I've quit this world, will, I hope, continue to grow.